



Homeland
Security

August 27, 2004

FACT SHEET

SEVIS – Year Two

The **Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)** is a web-based system for maintaining information on international students and exchange visitors and their dependents in the United States. Administered by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and utilized by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), SEVIS is designed to keep our nation safe while facilitating the entry and exit process for foreign students and exchange visitors already in the United States and for students and exchange visitors seeking to come to the U.S.

August 2004 marks the one-year requirement for all international student and exchange visitors to register with SEVIS. The SEVIS program is anticipated to build upon its striking first-year success as America welcomes 220,000 arriving international students and exchange visitors this fall.

A total of 8,737 schools and exchange visitor programs, representing more than 9,500 campuses are certified to participate in the program – and the number continues to grow. As of August 2004, there were more than 770,000 students and exchange visitors (F-1, M-1, and J-1 visa categories) approved to study in the United States whose data is being managed by SEVIS. In addition, SEVIS maintains records on more than 100,000 dependents of students and exchange visitors.

The process for ensuring compliance once individuals have arrived in the United States is streamlined and timely. Of those foreign students and exchange visitors studying in the United States, last year there were 36,600 potential student violators reported to the ICE Compliance Enforcement Unit (CEU). Reasons for an individual being considered in violation include a school reporting an individual a ‘no show’ (more than 2,900 students were reported as ‘no-shows’), expulsion, suspension, and failure to maintain a full course of study. The CEU examined the violations using law enforcement databases and referred 1,591 to the field for further investigation. These investigations resulted in 155 arrests.

The SEVIS program enables CBP Officers to access more and better information allowing them to quickly process legitimate students and exchange visitors through the ports of entry. Those students and exchange visitors registered in the program no longer have to present extensive documentation on paper forms for CBP Officers to review. However, failure to provide documentation and comply with entry/exit procedures is cause to refuse the student or exchange visitor admission into the United States. At the discretion of the CBP Officer a Form I-515A, Notice to Student or Exchange Visitor, may be issued, which authorizes temporary admission for 30 days into the United States and requires the student or exchange visitor to take immediate action to submit proper documentation.

SEVIS OUTREACH

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has made a significant effort to involve all stakeholders in international student and exchange visitor communities. The program is designed to keep our nation safe while facilitating the international learning process for foreign students and exchange visitors in the United States. To this end, SEVP not only holds bi-weekly stakeholder conference calls to provide an update on the system, but also proactively solicits feedback and suggestions from these stakeholders on ways to improve SEVIS. A number of these suggestions have been implemented into the program.

DHS also sponsors outreach events, attend academic conferences, and meets with stakeholders to address any issues that may arise and to keep the public informed of SEVIS progress. DHS has also worked with the State Department to develop informational brochures and fact sheets for international students and exchange visitors.

SEVIS PROGRESS

SEVIS allows the United States to collect and manage information on foreign students and exchange visitors by maintaining up-to-date data that can be accessed electronically. SEVIS has simplified what was once a manual process, resulting in more accurate and timely data, faster processing and fewer delays for student and exchange visitors. SEVIS, fully implemented shortly after the creation of DHS, was the first automated system in the nation that created this management capability for visiting students.

In June 2004, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congress's investigative arm, issued a report on the performance of SEVIS and concluded the system performance has improved. Even before the GAO report was completed, SEVIS had taken the initiative to make eight significant process improvements. SEVIS has also updated its reporting databases to ensure improved access to information and better service this fall when processing numbers are expected to increase.

The E-Gov Institute awarded SEVIS a Pioneer Award in recognition of the program's improved operations and streamlined processes. SEVIS was one of only 15 government entities recognized for this achievement, out of more than 150 government agencies.

SEVIS FEES

The 1996 law that mandated the establishment of SEVP and SEVIS also required the program be funded through the payment of fees. The implementation of a \$100 fee for international students, exchange visitors and scholars attending school or conducting research in the United States will take effect September 1, 2004. Students, scholars and exchange visitors from abroad whose schools or programs are approved in SEVIS will be required to pay the appropriate fee – in most cases, \$100 -- prior to obtaining their visas, making the program fee based.

The purpose of the fee is to cover the costs for the continued operation of the Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), including the administration and maintenance of SEVIS. The fee applies to F, J and M nonimmigrant classifications; however, participants in certain J-1 exchange visitor programs will pay a reduced fee of \$35 or be fee-exempt. The fee will also fund the establishment of a cadre of liaison officers to help school administrators and students use SEVIS more effectively.

SEVIS RESPONSE TEAMS (SRTs)

Congress mandated that all non-immigrant students and exchange visitors attending SEVIS-approved schools and programs be required to register with the SEVIS system by August 1, 2003. Anticipating that many schools, individual students and exchange visitors might have difficulty meeting this compliance date, ICE and CBP created a joint special SEVIS Response Team (SRT) to assist students and exchange visitors who may not have been registered in the SEVIS system by the deadline.

The SRTs worked with CBP inspectors, academic institutions and individual students and exchange visitors to resolve issues related to admission into the United States. Between August 2003 and February 2004, the SRTs experienced a dramatic decline in the volume of cases and calls – an indication that SEVIS is working. A May 2004 SEVIS process improvement enhanced the volume of SEVIS data made available to CBP inspectors at ports of entry. This data further assists CBP inspectors in determining the admission eligibility of international students arriving to the United States. This is also an indication that schools and programs were successful in ensuring that students and exchange visitors have the SEVIS documentation required for entry into the United States.

SEVIS improvements, including a SEVIS Help Desk, have made the need for these teams unnecessary this fall. However, the SEVP will have resources dedicated during this period to address any issues regarding SEVIS and the admission of students and exchange visitors.

SELECTED ENFORCEMENT SUCCESSES

- ICE agents completed two investigations, one involving a student and the other an exchange visitor, in which both had fraudulently applied for SEVIS certification for schools that were already SEVIS-certified. A prospective J-1 student to a university in Florida submitted a duplicate Form I-17, listing a different first name for the school's Primary Designated School Official (PDSO), and a different telephone number. The "error" was reported to the SEVIS Help Desk and an investigation was initiated.

The prospective student's name and email address were listed on the Form I-17 application. The information was forwarded to the ICE Cyber Crimes unit for further investigation. The information was also forwarded to the State Department, as the issuing and approving authority for J-1 exchange visitors. Had the Form I-17 been approved, the SEVIS system would have sent a user ID and password to the applicant, allowing the user to generate fraudulent Forms I-20.

- ICE agents completed several investigations of corrupt school officials selling fraudulent Forms I-20 and transcripts. One of these investigations resulted from an anonymous lead alleging a PDSO at a university in Texas was selling Forms I-20 and fraudulent transcripts. The fraudulent documents were being sold for \$150-\$400 each. One of the individuals in question wired in excess of \$40,000 out of the United States, despite working at a restaurant in Texas.

ICE Compliance Enforcement Unit (CEU) was notified and initiated actions to pursue the case as a criminal investigation. An ICE Financial Crime Unit also investigated the wire transfer overseas. Customs and Border Patrol is also on the lookout for all Forms I-20 issued by the university to students from Countries of Interest.

- ICE agents initiated an investigation involving an aeronautical university in Arizona. The CEU received a complaint from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) that a duplicate form requesting approval of school was filed in SEVIS.

An investigation followed, and determined this petition to be fraudulent. It is suspected this fraudulent request may have been initiated from Nigeria. Had this request been approved, the SEVIS system would have sent a user ID and password to the applicant, allowing the user to generate fraudulent Forms I-20.

These investigative examples demonstrate that SEVIS not only enhances the integrity of the admission process for foreign students and exchange visitors, but also provides an enhanced investigative tool to identify participating schools and school officials who may be attempting to issue fraudulent school documentation to procure a visa.

DHS